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Nalini Kant Jha, "Nehru and Modern India: Impact of His Personality on Foreign Policy," in T A. Nizami, ed., *Jawaharlal Nehru and Modern India* (Aligarh: Three Way Printers, 2003), pp. 17-22.

Nehru and Modern India: Impact of His Personality on Foreign Policy

Foreign policy of a country is, of course, determined by a large number of factors and no leader, however influential he or she may be is free in shaping foreign policy according to is whims and fancies. His freedom in this regard is restrained by both the realities of domestic as well as international politics.[1] India's first Prime Minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, himself was candid enough to admit this fact on several occasions. These constraints notwithstanding, personality of leaders, however, plays a significant role in the shaping of any country's foreign policy, as it is their vision and perception of the objective realties that ultimately matters in the making of foreign policy.

Not surprisingly, the personality factor is being increasingly recognized as a crucial element in foreign policy making, perhaps even more crucial than some of the established institutions. Scholars like Joseph Frankel have viewed the personality factor as 'a legitimate and important topic of historical analysis' in all investigations pertaining to external State behaviour."[2] More recent studies have gone even further by evoking a panoply of psychological approaches to understand the 'decision makers' cognitive system;' how it is formed and modified and how it operates 'so as to structure perceptions and thereby determine behaviour.'[3]

The role of personality in the making of foreign policies of developing countries like India is even more decisive, where institutions are less institutionalised as compared to well advanced countries In the case of India, for instance, the role of press, intelligentsia, and Parliament, etc., is normally not overwhelming on foreign policy decision makers. Besides, in a religious and a highly hierarchical society, where all those who have risen to political heights, are unquestioned by those who are close to them or are generally revered by those who are not, despite considerable erosion in their image. And the lack of interest in and knowledge of foreign affairs among the vast majority of Indians also prohibit them from providing any meaningful input in foreign policy making except perhaps during the crisis periods.[4]

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In order to have a better understanding of India's foreign policy, it is therefore necessary to closely examine the role of the personality factor in this regard. As Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru was the sole architect of India's foreign policy during its formative phase, the present paper therefore proposes to briefly discuss his role in this regard.

II

Surely, it was Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, who defined the broad framework of India's foreign policy. While Nehru's leadership influenced both domestic as well as foreign policies, his contribution to foreign policy was more significant. For, in the internal field, he built primarily on an existing framework; in the external arena, he had to lay the very foundations of the foreign policy edifice. In the domestic sphere, for example, there was a Civil Service and the rule of law had been established before Nehru. The beginning of the Indian democracy could be traced to the Morley-Minto Reforms. Large-scale industry and modern transport had been developing in India since the middle of the nineteenth century. Nehru, of course, did much to reorganize the Civil Service, re-draw the administrative map of India, extend democracy, and to plan economic development; but the base was already there. On the contrary, the basic elements of foreign policy had to be formulated. This exercise included: building up official contacts with sovereign States and with the international community organized in the United Nations; crating a foreign service and framing a foreign policy.[5]

It was really a tribute to Nehru's personality at lest partially that nobody, belonging to the mainstream of India politics really challenged it, excepting of course on a few occasions. Although the Indian Cabinet was composed of powerful personalities, it left foreign policy making to Nehru. Parliament trusted Nehru and it hardly showed any interest in foreign affairs, the external intelligence services were almost non-existent and the media was generally euphoric about the principles that underpinned India's policies. His own party, the Congress Party, virtually dominated the political scene with nobody really to challenge it. Even the Secretariat, established to assist Nehru, was basically a co-ordinating agency, which was classified as his personal Secretariat.[6] It never really

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acquired any degree of authority or power to become a policy making body. Its members were 'only gatherers and conveyors and, in short, mechanics men.[7]

Nehru had thus more or less complete hold over foreign policy, which was never replicated under any other Prime Minister. N G Ranga, the leader of the Swatantra Party, was correct when he wrote in *Indian Foreign Affairs* in April 1958, "India is today in the fortunate position that there is almost complete unity among all her political parities over her foreign policy.[8] Even one of the best informed critics of India's foreign policy at that time, and a respected statesman—Acharya Kripalani—began his criticism of foreign policy in Parliament by avowing his 'complete agreement with the basic principles of our foreign policy',[9] peace, anti-colonialism and non-alignment with power blocs.

There were, of course, differences in the approach of political parities to various aspects of foreign policy. The Praja Socialist Party, for instance, as Nehru said on 31 January 1957,[10] liked India to align herself more with the Western bloc, while the Communist Party wished to do so with the Soviet bloc. But there was no doubt that on the fundamental of foreign policy Pt Nehru was able to build up a broad national consensus.

III

Developing a broad national consensus on foreign policy apart, the impact of Nehru's personality on India's foreign policy can be seen three aspects of its foreign policy during its formative phase, namely, non-alignment, *panchsheel*, and the continuance of India's connection with the Commonwealth. For a start, while tailoring India's policy of non-alignment, Nehru was undoubtedly influenced by a variety of factors such the politics of the Cold War and India's domestic milieu, but it was his vision and perception that India could follow a policy that was dictated by these imperatives. It was, for instance, who clearly understood the logic of military alliance that could only erode the hard owned independence of newly liberated post-colonial states. It was he, who articulated with clarity that non-alignment was neutrality; it was not a negative policy, but a positive one; and that it would contribute to peace in so far as the area of peace built up the non-aligned countries would speak the language of peace, no of war. He also communicated the rational of this people in keeping with the Indian tradition of tolerance.[11]

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Another related basic idea to which Nehru was committed—and which he propagated with enthusiasm—was *panchsheel*, the five principles of peaceful co-existence. These principles, which first found mention in the India-China Agreement on Trade and Intercourse between Tibet Regions of China and India (1954) was based on Nehru's belief in India's grand tradition of tolerance that there may be different ways of progress, possibly different outlooks, but the broadly, the ultimate objectives are the same. Though this invited sharp criticisms from Indian leaders after India's debacle by the Chinese in 1962, but what is relevant to this discussion is that these principles appealed to a large number of nations as widely different in their foreign polices as the USA, the USSR and China.

The third aspect of foreign policy in which Nehru's influence is seen is India's continued association with Commonwealth—a decision, which was ratified by the Constituent Assembly on 17 May 1949. The Prime Minister, as the representative of India, had agreed to the declaration on the continued membership of India in the Commonwealth of Nations at the Conference of Commonwealth Prime Ministers in London on 19 April 1949. While answering to critics of this policy, Nehru explained that in agreeing to India's continuance in the Commonwealth, they were not breaking any pledge they had taken in earlier years to achieve *Purna Swaraj* or complete independence; the commonwealth did not take away an iota of Indian independence. Rather, it would be to India's advantage to continue her association with a group of nations to further certain causes, peace for instance, in which India was interested.[12]

IV

Needless to add, Nehru's polices were not unopposed. As is well known, his policies were subjected to scathing criticism especially on two issues, namely, on India's approach to the Hungarian crisis of 1956 and the Chinese attack on India in 1962. After India's defeat in the Sino-Indian war of 1962, it was Nehru personally rather then the Government of India was targeted for attack. For the first time in his life, wrote a journalist, Kuldip Nayar, "Nehru heard his countrymen say that he had betrayed them."[13]

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This forced Nehru to admit his mistake in Parliament and later on embark on the modernization of India's defence forces. It is a different matter that he could not survive to continue with this new pragmatic approach to foreign and security policies.

If one were to assess the impact of Nehru's personality on three aspects of India's foreign policy, namely, routine, broad framework and crisis situations, it could be argued that though on routine and evolving the broad framework, Nehru exercised a decisive control, crisis situations were not under his complete control. He was held accountable and he had to introduce changes on these matters under public pressure manifested through Parliamentary debate, press and attitude of the opposition parties, etc.

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[1] For a theoretical overview of foreign policy making, see Nalini Kant Jha, *Domestic Imperatives in India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi, 2002), chapter-I.

[2] Joseph Frankel, *The Making of Foreign Policy: An Analysis of Decision Making* (London, 1963), p.15

[3] Michael Clarke and Brian While, eds., *Understanding Foreign Policy: The Foreign Policy Systems Approach* (Aldershot, 1989), pp. 138, 141. See also, Richard W. Cottam, *Foreign Policy Motivations: A General Theory and a Case Study* (Pittsburgh, 1977).

[4] Jha, n. 1, pp. 58.

[5] A. Appadorai, *Domestic Roots of India's Foreign Policy* (New Delhi, 1981), p.226.

[6] Harish Kapur, *India's Foreign Policy, 1947-92: Shadows and Substance* (New Delhi, 1994), p.180.

[7] M. O. Mathai, *Reminiscences of the Nehru Age* (New Delhi, 1978), p.76.

[8] *Indian Foreign Affairs*, vol.1, no.2, April 1958, p.30.

[9] India, Lok Sabha, *Debates*, vol. I, part II, 25 March 1957, cols. 722-3.

[10] *The Hindu* (Madras), 2 February 1957.

[11] Nalini Kant Jha, "Cultural and Philosophical Roots of India's Foreign Policy," *International Studies* (New Delhi), vol. 26, no. 1 January-March 1989, pp.45-66.

[12] Appadorai, n.5, pp. 229-30.

[13] Kuldip Nayar, *India: The Critical Years* (New Delhi, 1971).